The forgotten ones: a case study on conceptualising and implementing a peer mentoring program for postgraduate coursework students

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Abstract

We employed an action research approach to develop a context specific peer mentoring program (Postgrad Assist) that aids first year postgraduate coursework (PGCW) students in their transition to postgraduate study. We explored the transition literature and best practice approaches, undertook comprehensive surveys of both our students and staff, conducted student focus groups, formed a diverse working party, with strong representation from students and adopted an on-going evaluation program to develop and refine Postgrad Assist. The program substantially alleviated transitioning students' cultural and academic shock, and social isolation. The program makes a contribution to the transition and mentoring research domain in that it challenges the common misconception that PGCW students are similar to undergraduate students with no particular distinguishing features that would suggest a need for a different approach to their mentoring.

Context

Peer support programs for first year undergraduate (UG) students in transition in higher education are widespread, well-documented and researched. Transition issues at postgraduate coursework (PGCW) level are less well researched due to an 'incorrect assumption of homogeneity amongst postgraduates' (O'Donnell et al., 2009, p. 31). Inherent in this assumption is that postgraduate (PG) students are simply moving from one level to the next and that they have the necessary expertise for this transition (O'Donnell et al., 2009; Tobbell et al., 2009). However, the reality is that PGCW students 'typically return to study in an environment substantially different from that of their previous study' (Wozniak et al., 2009, p. 221).

PGCW students are on the increase at many institutions due to demand for higher academic qualifications, a general widening of the student cohort to include those from lower socio-economic groups and expanding numbers of international students. This pattern was reflected in our School's demographics and anecdotal feedback from academic staff and students indicated that the transition process for this cohort was not straightforward. We recognised two ways of approaching the problem. We could 'retrofit' approaches used in the First Year UG model, as exemplified by PASS (peer assisted study sessions), but feedback from our focus groups indicated that this model would not suit the students' needs. Alternatively, as poorly developed peer mentoring schemes can be harmful to both mentors and mentees (Husband & Jacobs, 2009), we favoured an action based approach, grounded in the literature and reflective of student needs, to develop, pilot and implement a context specific peer mentoring program. Our case study analyses the evolution of the program, *Postgrad Assist*

and its unique characteristics and discusses the lessons learned, as a mechanism to improve practice elsewhere and to add to the paucity of literature on this forgotten group of students.

Our starting point

Our institution has over 45,000 students, 25 per cent of whom are international students coming from over 130 countries. Within our School, we observed increasing numbers and diversity in the PGCW student cohort (e.g. over 50% international students, from over 60 countries) and multiple pathways in, through and out of our programs For example, they transitioned to our School from other universities (local, interstate and international); after a period of absence from academic study; from different disciplinary backgrounds from their UG studies and their most recent professional practice. For example, many were 'career changers' transitioning from professional workplaces with work experience that was very different to that of their chosen PG program. All of these factors combined created a cohort of students who were unsure of their real academic abilities in terms of understanding the epistemology of their new area of study, their ability to engage in their new discourse community, to cope with rapidly changing learning technologies and to manage their multiple roles (e.g. student, parent, full-time worker). Despite this complexity, based on an extensive literature review, we found little relevant research on best practice peer mentoring for PGCW students and we found ourselves needing to explore this field of transitional practice. Supported by a university teaching and learning grant we engaged in an action research approach to conceptualising and implementing a peer mentoring program for our PGCW students.

What the literature told us about PGCW peer mentoring

Existing research extensively discusses the meaning of peer mentoring and the benefits this can provide, including increased retention rates, improved academic performance, and a reduction in feelings of isolation and uncertainty, particularly for students from different cultural backgrounds (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Colvin & Jaffar, 2010; Husband & Jacobs, 2009; Treston, 1999). Surprisingly there is little empirical research analysing the process of mentoring (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Lunsford, 2011) and in higher education, the literature indicates that mentoring programs are run extensively, but primarily focus on UG students (mainly first years) and PG research students (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; O'Donnell et al., 2009; Tobell & O'Donnell, 2005; Tokuno, 2008; J.Keupp pers comm. 2010). The lack of information on the mentoring of PGCW students (Wright-Harper & Cole, 2008) may be due to the false assumptions that PGCW students: have similar needs to UG students; are too small in number to warrant special attention; do not have the perceived status of PG research students; have prior experience of university education; and are sufficiently mature to know how to succeed in a university context. However, our research indicated that this group of students did warrant special and separate consideration. They have been described as the forgotten, invisible and unrepresented students within higher education contexts (Cluett & Skene, 2006; O'Donnell et al., 2009). These difficulties necessitated re-analysis of the existing literature through the lens of the PGCW student to identify what was of value and what required a fresh approach.

What our students told us about their transition experiences

Between 2009-10 we conducted an ethnographic study to examine our PGCW students' expectations and experiences during their transition to the School and discovered that this cohort, and in particular the international students, faced acute issues of social isolation, and

cultural and 'academic shock' (Baron & Carr, 2008), with subsequent impacts on their health, well-being and academic success. In effect their transition issues reflected those of UG students. An overwhelming priority emerged for a peer mentoring program to help PGCW students to form social networks, and improve their engagement, sense of belonging and academic success.

A key constraint that shaped peer mentoring for the PGCW cohort was the short duration of PGCW study programs. This compressed the transition process (usually to a maximum of 3 or 4 semesters) requiring students to adapt quickly to a new institution, learning styles, assessment expectations and unfamiliar systems. This was even more complex for international students, who represented about 50 per cent of our School's PGCW students, as they also had to adapt quickly to their new country and its culture, and communicate in English, which for many students was their second language. The time factor also constrained our pool of mentors as semester 2 and 3 students were more focused on their own studies rather than becoming involved in mentoring. These particular circumstances, that are unique to PGCW students, increased the need for speedy, targeted, and contextualised support. Undergraduate peer mentoring programs have the luxury of time – both for the mentoring process itself and for the potential mentors. The constraints of time indicated that we could not simply replicate the common approaches employed at undergraduate level.

The Postgrad Assist program

Postgrad Assist was based on an action research methodology and was designed by a working party with representation from academic staff (3), university support staff (3) and PGCW students (5). Student representatives were selected on the basis of a short written statement outlining why they would like to participate in the planning workshop. One student highlighted the problems faced by transitioning PGCW students:

> …being an international student, I have experienced … both advantages and difficulties during the first semester ... not only in academic issues, but also in social and personal aspects. Therefore, I am happy to share my experience with new future students through the Peer Mentoring Program. I hope my input can somehow help new international students be prepared for their interesting, but also challenging studying life at [name of institution].

A one day workshop helped to identify the conceptual framework for the program. We undertook a comprehensive review of the literature on PGCW transition processes and the factors affecting student success, followed by a thorough examination of relevant practical experience elsewhere (mainly in Australia and the USA), particularly in institutions that offer professional degree programs. We surveyed all of our School's course coordinators to map the essential skills and knowledge required of PGCW students and their perceptions of the gaps. Students were surveyed to identify the effectiveness of the current transition process (e.g. preparedness, knowledge/skills gaps, sense of belonging, strengths/weaknesses) and this was followed by in-depth focus groups to tease out the specific nature of the issues identified in the survey. These steps enabled the key elements of the program to be identified. Postgrad Assist was piloted in Semester 1, 2012 followed by a full roll-out in Semester 2, 2012. In terms of operational elements (i.e. the delivery of the program) Postgrad Assist focuses on assisting with integration into the university and School and providing psychosocial support to commencing PGCW students (i.e. establishment of social networks with other students and emotional support from peers and staff) (Baron & Carr, 2008; Hall & Jaugietis, 2010). It operates School-wide for all PGCW students in their first semester of study.

There is ample evidence in the literature of the failure of peer mentoring programs due to unclear roles and expectations (Blake-Beard, 2001; Crisp & Cruz, 2009), which often stem from the use of a 'one-size-fits-all' peer mentoring model that does not match the specific context. Thus we employed a formal peer mentoring approach which incorporated clear expectations, directed mentor and mentee assignments, delineation of rights and responsibilities between mentor and mentee, specific contractual time periods, and predetermined actions and activities (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Lee & Bush, 2003). We considered, but dismissed the idea of an informal mentoring program (Budge, 2006; Eby & Lockwood, 2005) as such programs may miss the very students who are in most need of mentoring (e.g. international students) and do not foster students' commitment to engagement on an ongoing basis (Lee & Bush, 2003).

While the literature (Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2002) tends to suggest that mentors should be volunteers, our research indicated that PGCW students are 'time jealous' (Billet, 2013) and unlikely to invest their time and effort in mentoring to the detriment of their own studies, especially given the short duration of many of the School's programs of study. A compromise was reached whereby mentors were paid for 20 hours of work and volunteered an equal amount of time over the semester. Financial support provided by the School was essential in the ongoing delivery of the program and enabled a formal program to be designed and implemented.

Eby et al. (2000) and Stanley and Lapsley (2008) stress the importance of addressing the practicalities related to the mentoring program itself and to this end we based our approach on the best available research, our specific context and the advice of the student representatives. The main components of Postgrad Assist (Table 3) highlight a diverse consideration of issues related to the structure, participation, organisation and content of the program. In particular we identify three differentiating elements of Postgrad Assist that are key to its success: group mentoring; buddy peer mentors; and targeted mentor training.

1. *Group mentoring*: The program was designed around a series of formal group meetings, augmented with informal social gatherings. Full engagement of mentees in the mentoring relationship is important, as less than full participation can diminish the effectiveness of this relationship and the program itself (Lunsford, 2011). Each mentor was allocated up to 10 mentees, who varied in age, gender and cultural background, and meetings and related activities were undertaken as a group rather than one-to-one mentoring. All mentees agreed to attend both the formal and informal group meetings. Group mentoring facilitated peer interaction and engagement as a mechanism to solve common problems and thus reduced the emphasis on the mentor as problem solver. Non-attendees were always asked to identify the reasons for their non-attendance and if this continued, they were asked to formally withdraw from the program. A key purpose of the group approach was to establish strong networks of support among the students.

2. *Buddy pairing of mentors*: This enabled mentors to collaborate and share ideas and provide support to each other when necessary. For example, the mentors collaborated in the design of activities and at times conducted joint social activities among the mentor groups.

3. *Mentor training*: The mentor-mentee relationship (Allen et al., 1997), application (Baron, 2009) and training process (Husband & Jacobs, 2009) are crucial to the success of any mentoring program. We designed a targeted and two-step mentor training process. Step one involved a one day training program focusing on competency and skills development

and student performance on various scenarios aided in the final selection of the mentors. Step two was a half day training session for the selected mentors and focused on administrative issues and the design and development of targeted mentoring activities.

Evaluation, adaptive management and lessons learned

A formal reporting system can help to eliminate dysfunctional situations occurring within mentoring programs (Husband & Jacobs, 2009). In Postgrad Assist we employed a number of evaluation methods at different stages to adaptively manage the program including: a survey of the mentor training program; fortnightly reflective mentor reports (outlining activities and issues encountered); formal meetings between mentors and project staff (at Weeks 3, 7 and 13); and a mentee survey (Week 13). The key aspects evaluated included: what was working well for mentors and mentees; the main barriers; support provided to mentors; communication among mentees; and overall project improvements. Combining the input from all evaluation methods we can highlight four key outcomes:

1. *Improved mentee social and academic skills*

Mentees valued being a part of the program and that they had improved their social skills, including confidence to solve their own problems. Based on our pilot evaluation (27/37 mentees) 64% believed that the program helped them to become more socially confident and able to express their views and 'stand up for yourself'. Consistent with Davidson and Forester-Johnson's (2001) findings, Postgrad Assist minimised cultural differences and the impacts of these differences on students' expectations and performance. The mentees had formed friendships and were 'grateful for the social connections that have been facilitated by the mentoring project' (Mentor feedback). 'There is a collective feeling of knowing that they are not alone' and that '… there was someone they could talk to in times of stress' (Mentor feedback). Mentors assisted with a range of social activities which eased the stress of transitioning. This included finding accommodation, transport, shopping, and accessing university services. Mentees reported that Postgrad Assist helped mentees to adapt quickly to the academic styles and requirements of the School. They also shared their knowledge with others.

> They are helping each other. I see them working together. During meetings they advise each other. Also in lectures they sit together. They form informal study groups (Mentor).

A mentor commented that 'the social outcomes have also helped with achieving academic outcomes', and in particular improved confidence with English expression for international students.

> They are also worried about English, but the advice and socialising has helped and they have gained confidence with English and they tend to discuss their different experiences and this helps.

When surveyed about the best aspects of the program, mentees included: 'meeting with and making friends with other new students during meetings and social events'; 'having a nominated contact person [mentor] to ask questions'; and the 'campus tour'. The majority of mentee respondents believed that the program had helped them engage in the School community (89%) and the university community (70%); that it helped them to access university services and support (77%); and helped them to make an effective transition to postgraduate study (71%). The formal evaluation made no attempt to assess whether the grades of students within the program improved as a result of participation in Postgrad Assist, as the factors affecting academic grades are the result of many interacting factors,

both human and institutional. However, all students proceeded to the next stage of their degree program and were retained within their respective programs. Overall, while some mentees did not know what to expect of Postgrad Assist when they started all agreed that the program had been useful in providing important information that enabled them to transition seamlessly into their programs of study.

2. *Targeted support is required early*

Unlike the targeted '*First Year* Experience' programs of support for UG students, PGCW students must adapt quickly and hence require '*First Semester* Experience' targeted support. The compressed nature of PGCW programs requires early preparation (e.g. mentor training and selection, contacting mentees and organising mentoring groups prior to the start of the semester) and just-in-time support early in the semester when Mentee needs are greatest (e.g. settling into the institution, organising their personal lives and adapting to sometimes unfamiliar teaching and learning systems). Some of the main issues discussed in the early part of the semester revolved around assignments, reading loads, accessing printing/photocopying, and overcoming English language issues.

3. *Mentor training and benefits*

Consistent with existing research (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011) mentors demonstrated enhanced leadership, communication and organisational skills and felt a sense of pride when assisting their mentees to resolve issues: 'It feels good when they come to us and we collectively can solve or fix their problems'. All agreed that mentoring had given them a better understanding about the university/school, services and facilities available: 'I feel more a part of [the institution]. I have a willingness to know what is going on and I can share this'.

4. *Ripples on a pond effect*

The mentors observed their mentees assisting students not enrolled in Postgrad Assist. This resulted in a:

> … critical mass of informed students who help each other out. One mentee has helped other mentees and these then help other students through informal networks… their thinking is – I need to know this, but so do some of my friends – so they pass information along'.

This widening of the impact of the program to other students enhances the financial effectiveness of the program and reduces the time spent by academic and professional staff in addressing minor, trivial or low level student queries.

The comprehensive evaluation indicated strong support for Postgrad Assist. However, while the program was successful on many levels there were some issues that arose and needed adaptive management. These included: misunderstandings by mentees that mentors would provide more academic and career advice and tutoring; a perception by some that mentees could ask for one-on-one assistance; and failure of several mentees to attend formal meetings and some social events due to poor time management. While mentors consistently referred students to the relevant staff and university services, some mentees criticised the program for its failure to provide these services. In response to these and other issues, the program's documents have been amended to highlight these issues and program staff attend the first peer mentoring session each semester to reinforce the formal and specific nature of Postgrad Assist.

Conclusion

PGCW programs and degrees are on the increase globally, as universities strive to retain UG students, as well as attract both domestic and international students to their PGCW programs. Despite this change, transition issues at the PGCW level are less well researched due to incorrect assumptions of homogeneity amongst postgraduates and prior experience. Inherent in this assumption is that PGCW students are simply moving from one level to the next and that they already have the necessary expertise for this transition (O'Donnell et al., 2009; Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010). The reality is somewhat different and institutions of higher education have been slow to respond to the diverse needs of this group. Consequently PGCW students are often the forgotten cohort within higher education and tailored PGCW peer mentoring programs are scarce. By grounding our research in current peer mentoring literature and employing an action research and collaborative approach to developing a context specific PGCW peer mentoring program we developed a peer mentoring program that has the capacity to enhance the academic and social outcomes, provide timely access to support and enhance the wellbeing and sense of belonging of this cohort. Since the program is in the early stages it is not possible to demonstrate the longitudinal impacts of the program and the compressed time and captive audience nature of the international PGCW experience makes reference to quantitative measures such as grade improvement and retention rates inapt. The determination of impact measures for this cohort is a potential research gap to be explored.

The significance of this research is that it highlights an under-explored area within the higher education sector, and outlines important considerations in the development of a transition program and a peer-mentoring approach for PGCW students. No longer should PGCW students be the forgotten and invisible face of the university.

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Table 1
Key elements of the Postgrad Assist Program

Attributes	Components	Design features
Structure	*Management*	School based (across 3 programs of study) Postgrad Assist Director responsible for program oversight and reporting (no committee) Postgrad Assist Coordinator responsible for day to day running of the program
	Duration	One full semester (about 17 weeks)
	Mentor-Mentee interactions	Face-to-face group meetings (academic skills and social) Communication via e-mail, phone and social media (e.g. professional networking site)
Participants	*Mentee characteristics*	PGCW students in the first semester of their program of study; male and female; international and domestic (i.e. diversity in culture and language); any age
	Mentor characteristics	Completed at least one semester of study in the School; male and female; international and domestic; any age
	Mentee recruitment	Formal invitation sent to all new students enrolling in a first semester course within the School Promotional flyers with QR code placed at strategic locations Requested to submit expression of interest application Prospective mentees provided with Mentee Handbook (incorporating Code of Conduct) Required to sign formal Mentee Agreement
	Mentor recruitment	Program advertised throughout the semester to enhance its visibility to potential future mentors Invitation sent to all PGCW students in the School, and recommendations sought from School staff Formal selection process, including expression of interest and questionnaire; and performance at a one-day training program Sign Mentor Agreement form (including Code of Conduct)
Organisation	*Mentor training and induction*	1 day formal compulsory training session (also used to assist selection of Mentors) Compulsory half-day Mentor Induction addressing administrative processes Regular contact (on an as-needs basis) with Postgrad Assist Coordinator
	Mentor rewards/ recognition	Certificate of attendance at mentor training; Gift or food voucher for attendance at training 20 hours of paid work and expected to volunteer for 20 hours Certificate of Competence awarded at the end of the mentoring period - details skills attained
	Mentor-Mentee matching	Buddy pairs for mentors (preference is for 1 domestic/1 international student and male/female) Ratio of about 1 Mentor to 10 Mentees (i.e. 2:20) Groups are mixed (e.g. age, gender, program, mode of study, language abilities, and cultural background); ensure some similarities in program/courses studied and cultural background Finalised prior to the first activities (i.e. campus tour) in O week
	Meeting arrangements	Formal, structured meetings (detailed in semester timetable) Meetings held fortnightly, with monthly social activities Mentors negotiate meeting times and communication channels with Mentees (email, text, social media) in week 1 Mentors provided with a checklist detailing Week 1 activities and topics Week 1 meetings are attended by the Postgrad Assist Coordinator to reinforce roles and responsibilities and expectations of the program Location of meetings is flexible (off campus meetings and activities require OH&S clearance) Program begins in O week with a campus tour and attendance at the orientation session End of program social activity for all mentors and mentees
	Information dissemination	All mentors/mentees join the School's graduate students' professional networking site (4GPEMPOSTGRADS) as this enhances communication and information exchange Email communication and information on the School website
	Documentation	Staff Manual, Mentor Handbook, Mentee Guide, Code of Conduct, Key Contacts List, Application, Agreement and Withdrawal forms, report templates (mentors), advertising flyers (poster and email), training and induction resources, certificates of attendance and competency
	Evaluation	Mentor fortnightly reports sent to Postgrad Assist Coordinator (e.g. include attendance, activities undertaken, key outcomes and any problems) Mentor evaluation meeting with staff (Week 6 and Week 13) Mentor online survey of training program Mentee online survey delivered at the end of the program
Content	*Academic*	Issues addressed can include: academic integrity (plagiarism and its consequences); expectations in classes; information regarding study skills support workshops; examination and grievance policies Mentors do not provide academic advice relating to program or course selection Mentors do not tutor Mentees (i.e. in a formal tutoring sense)
	Institutional	Advice for accessing university services (e.g. Student services, housing, banking) Advice for dealing with university/school administration Locating campus facilities (e.g. undertake a campus tour)
	Social	Dissemination of information on local and regional activities and events Assistance with adapting to life in a new city/ country (acculturation) Informal meetings can be arranged around a social activity End of program social event (e.g. BBQ)

(Adapted from Hall and Jaugietis, 2011)